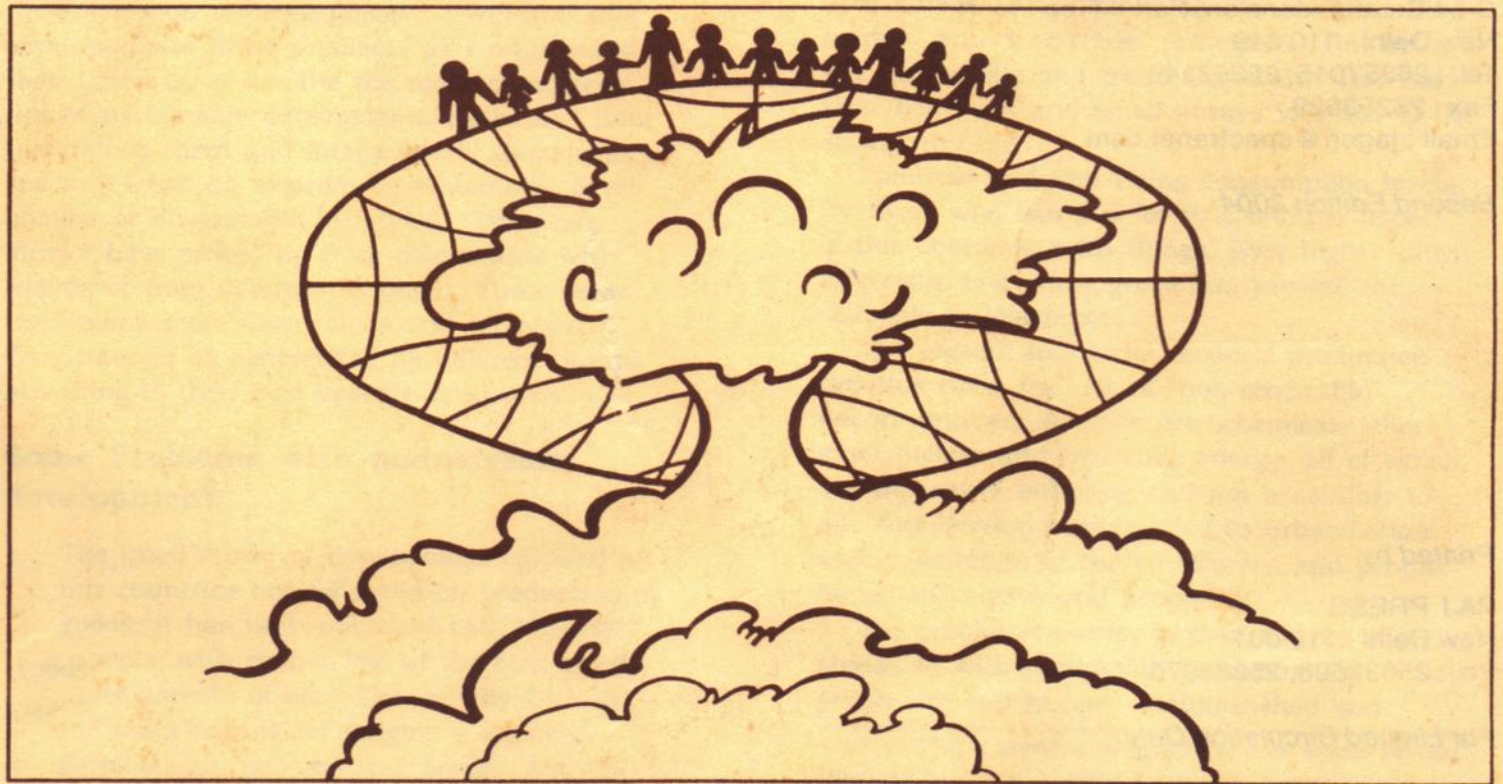


SOME THOUGHTS ON
Development
AND
Sustainable Development



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These days many people are talking about alternative development. The word 'alternative' means — another way, something different. So many of us are thinking about alternative development because we are dissatisfied with what is usually called development because of some very serious problems with the present notion of development. I will first talk about some of these problems as I understand them, then try to outline the main characteristics of sustainable development, again as I have understood them and finally speak about what you and I can do to promote sustainable development or sustainable life-styles. These are ideas I have picked up from discussions with friends or from different writings. These ideas need much more discussions and refinement. They have to be concretised by different groups according to their own specific conditions.

Some Problems with mainstream development

1. The main model of development followed by our countries has focussed on production of goods; it has been obsessed with material aspects, with economics, at the cost of all other aspects of life. This is why GNP is the main criteria for judging a country's development, people's well being. And GNP

is calculated by anything that is produced and sold in the market. Liquor production, weapons production, pornography - all these go into the calculation of GNP. Can the number of weapons a country produces be a measure of its well being?

Profit is the main God in this model of development; profit based on the so called "free market" and "free trade" principles. But actually the market and trade are neither free nor fare. The weak and small always lose out to the strong and big.

Limitless and ever-rising consumption levels for those who can pay for it is another aspect of this obsession with things. Ever higher rates of growth, ever more greed has become the rationale for existence.

The present industrial mode of production depends upon the use of "non-renewable" energy sources, such as petrochemicals, thermal, nuclear and hydraulic energy, all of which are expensive, polluting and not accessible to all. This development has led to urbanisation and exploitation of the rural areas and people by urban centres and people.

The problem however is that, inspite of its obsession with production large numbers of people are still hungry, malnourished and

A talk given at a workshop for grass-root level women activists organized by Action for World Solidarity in August 1991.



under-clothed. For example, inspite of continuous rise in production in India, 17% people are severely malnourished, 40% moderately malnourished. According to one estimate, because of continued malnourishment, the average height of people has gone down in some rural areas. 40,000 children become blind every year in India because of Vitamin A deficiency. This shows how socially unjust the growth in GNP has been. The rich are squandering the limited resources of the world while the poor do not have enough to survive in this system.

It is being increasingly recognized that the systems has

- exploited nature, and people
- it has increased disparities at all levels
- it has created hierarchies of all kinds- hierarchies in nations, peoples, cultures, sexes etc.
- it has led to rigid and harmful specialisation and compartmentalisation making it difficult to look at phenomenon holistically and ecologically.
- it has created dualities and hierarchies between culture and nature, mind and matter, rational and emotional, objective and subjective etc.

In this development, higher values like ethics, morality, justice have been forgotten or relegated to the area of the personal or religious life. Public life is purely for the pursuit of profit and power.

2. Modern science considered man to be supreme, over and above nature, not part of nature. This same attitude has been the basis of our development models. This has not only led to the marginalisation of nature but marginalisation of the principles of nature leading to ecological disasters, environmental destruction. Nature is considered a non-living thing, a resource, a constant supplier of raw materials and an absorber of wastes, not a living system. Nature has also been perceived as passive. Consequently nature has been plundered - forests have been cut, land, water, air have been poisoned by too much use of pesticides, fertilisers; rivers and seas have been poisoned by factory effluents, oil tankers and all sorts of poisonous gases. Unnatural life styles have developed very dangerous chemical-intensive systems of agriculture and health.

This killing of nature affects the poor and specially, poor rural women much more. If forests disappear, she is the one who has to



walk longer to get water, fodder and fuel. The men in her family are forced to leave the villages to go to cities in search of jobs. She becomes the head of the household, the sole care-taker. These very processes sometimes push her into prostitution. When there is nothing else to sell, the poor sell their bodies. It is becoming obvious that this kind of development based on greed and injustice is unsustainable. The life support systems of tribals, peasants are disappearing. People's resources like common land, forests, water have been becoming profit hunting grounds for industry, loggers etc.

3. This present form of development has also marginalised women, disempowered them. Women were at the centre of things when households were the centre of production, centres of health care. Women developed and possessed knowledge and skills in agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts, medicine. When all these activities were commercialised and industrialised women lost out. Their knowledge was declared traditional therefore unscientific and redundant. As production moved out of the family they lost control over production and subsequently also lost control over decision making and power. The introduction of cash crops instead of food crops often

meant that women did the work but men took the cash. Food crops fed families but crops which produce cash do not necessarily feed families. Cash can be and is often squandered by men on non-essentials. The present model of development has strengthened patriarchal ideology and system. Women continue to lose out in this system. They continue to be pushed into the least paid jobs, they are at the bottom of all hierarchies. They continue to carry double burden of work. Violence against women is systemic. Women's bodies are forever on sale in media and in real life.

4. Another problem with development today is that it follows what has been called the Dominator Model. The urge is to dominate, to control. Competition rather than cooperation has been seen as the main force for change. This thirst for power has led to centralisation of resources and decision-making power. Originally more people controlled local resources, but slowly you find fewer and fewer people controlling more and more resources. Decision-making power is also getting more and more centralized. Instead of decisions being made at the village level they are being made at the district level or country level or made by international organizations or multinational



corporations in some other country. This leads to lop-sided development, like coca cola being available in countries where people do not have safe drinking water. Everyone knows that drinks like coca cola are not only not essential but they are harmful but there is no ban on them. They are produced for profit. The money which a poor person spends first goes to the Indian counterparts and then to the US. Similarly big companies come and exploit forests, mines, seas. The local people whose lives depend on these resources have no say. They become the victims of 'development'. Their share in the profits is either nil or marginal. They lose control over their own resources. They become less and less autonomous. What happens to poor people also happens to poor countries; they also lose their independence and autonomy - economically, politically and culturally. In this top down system, money, resources and power flow from the weaker to the stronger, from the poor to the rich. Within the family women lose control, rural areas are exploited by the urban centres and poor countries subsidise the affluence of the rich nations.

5. If you want to control people and their resources you need ways to control and

coerce; therefore militarisation becomes essential. Huge amounts of resources are spent to develop systems to control people. Landlords have their personal armies to control labour, industrialists have their methods to coerce and control. We have seen the growth of armies, police, weapons all around us. Billions of dollars are spent even by poor countries on armies, police and arsenals. The problem is not just with the money and resources which are wasted but with the thinking that you have to control people with coercive State power, and the bigger and richer the State, the more the power. So the US has the largest killing power.

We saw how all the rich countries showed their power in the recent Gulf War. In South Asia, it is India which is seen as the Big Brother who wants to control the neighboring countries. The principle - big fish swallow small fish - is operating every where - in politics, economics, culture.

While 60% of the world's population lives in poverty, two million dollars are spent on weapons every minute. Militarisation as a principle of violence or control is closely connected to patriarchy and male violence. It is linked to the violence in the family. The two go together. We see violence all around us now, in different



shapes. Wars are made to keep weapon factories going. Again the reason is profit for some. Profit is considered more important than life. What is worse and more dangerous is that as a result peoples minds have been brutalised, militarised, they have been so shaped that they can throw bombs on cities, kill innocent people, or sit and watch violent sex without being incensed. Again women are the worst victims of militarised and violent minds.

6. Another thing this 'development' has been doing is homogenisation, which means moving towards one or fewer varieties, reducing diversity. This is happening in every area of life. In agriculture multi-cropping was given up for mono-cropping. Instead of having thousands of varieties of rice and wheat we now have just a few varieties, those too increasingly controlled by a few big companies. The same is true in industry. For the market it is better to have standardization. Instead of thousands of people making small things in every village big companies take over. To give some examples, previously in every village or city people made washing soaps; families had small units to make soap. Lots of people made small profits and lived simply. Now we have Nirma washing powder from

South to the North -- or Tata soap or a few others, all produced by big companies. Millions of people producing cloth were displaced by a few big textile industries. Similarly, the plastic industry has wiped out potters, leather workers, rope-makers. Crafts and crafts people with tremendous creativity and diversity have been rendered jobless.

Similarly, small traders have been taken over by big trading companies. The move is from small and many to big and few. Few people control and large number of people become mere employees. They sell their labour or brain. Their relationship to work changes. There is less and less creativity. Work becomes mindless. People lose their autonomy. There is increasing alienation and frustration. Human beings themselves become like machines.

The same thing is happening to culture everywhere — brahmin culture taking over tribal culture; North Indian culture taking over South Indian culture. Dowry spreading to communities where it never existed; US culture has been taking over the world. Coco-cola, hamburgers, barbie dolls, superman have become international. For profits the US companies have pushed junk food, junk drinks, junk culture everywhere. Media creates the minds to buy junk. From a village in Dhaka to a school in



Washington the children are watching the same thing. Do the children in the US know the dolls Indian children play with or the stories they hear? No, it is all one way. It is not cultural exchange but one-sided cultural domination.

The culture of the powerful countries, of dominant classes or castes spreads to all the others. It is seldom the other way around. Black people's jazz or Indian yoga may become popular elsewhere but these are exceptions.

Homogenization not only wipes away diversity but it is also states that third world, tribal or women's culture, industry, agriculture, medicine, science, are inferior, not good enough and hence to be shunned.

Through various means the belief is spread that North Indian culture is superior, English is superior, modern medicine is superior, western science is superior. Not that they are actually superior but they are declared to be superior because there is economic and political power behind them. In this it is always the minorities, indigenous people, the tribals, the women, the third world countries which lose out. The rich the powerful are the winners, the supermen of economics, politics and culture.

7. It is quite obvious from every thing I have said so far that this profit and greed ori-

ented system is socially, economically, politically and culturally unjust.

All these characteristics of the present mainstream development make it quite obvious that this kind of development is not sustainable. US and other industrialised countries cannot be the model for the so called developing countries. There are no resources on planet earth for all the developing countries to have the standards of consumption which the industrialised world has and which it has been showing as a dream to the others. If all the citizens of this earth consumed as much as average US or European citizens consume, life on this planet will come to a halt.

Visionaries like Mahatma Gandhi knew this 50 years ago. He warned the whole world but the world leaders were too dazzled by technology to heed a man like Gandhi who said. "Mother Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed." Once a Journalist asked Mahatma Gandhi whether he wanted India to have the same standard of living which Britain had. Gandhi replied "To have its standard of living, a tiny country like Britain had to exploit half the globe. How many globes will a large country like India need to exploit to have a similar standard of living?"



It is quite clear from what Gandhi said and what can be observed by anyone who cares to see, that planet earth belongs to the whole of humanity. It cannot be allowed to be plundered by the greedy rich nations and rich people. Excessive and wasteful consumption by some deprives the majority of essentials and it also destroys ecology. The problem is so serious that all of us have to act soon, before it's too late.

Some Principles of Sustainability

The question which arises now is what kind of life-styles and development will be sustainable; what will be the main characteristics of sustainability.

Lots of people every where are searching for solutions. These are people who are concerned, who care and who are brave enough to ask serious questions, brave enough to challenge the big and powerful, the greedy and ruthless. Isn't it incredible that the so called educated, scientific, modern, rich people are leading the world to disaster and it is the poor, the so called uneducated people who are shouting "Stop this madness". A Latin American activist/thinker said recently, "My people do not want development. They only want to live."

In fact now one has to wonder who is more "advanced"; those who are totally divorced from

nature and who are destroying the planet with their unsustainable life styles or those who are still trying to live in harmony with nature? Who are global citizens? The jet set types zipping across the world or those who consume little and do not contribute to ecological disaster? Who should be the experts now, the scientists, economists and politicians who have brought the world to the brink of disaster or those women and men whose knowledge, wisdom, life styles were declared, "backward"?

So, what do we have to do to ensure that every one can live? Some things are already quite clear. They will get clearer as we move forward on the path of sustainable living. Our concern is not just for the present generation but also for generations to come. Each generation should hand over a better, more just and sustainable world to the next generation.

Instead of going into complex definitions of sustainability, I will just mention some principles which have to be followed to move towards a sustainable social, economic and political order.

1. It is now clear that development has to be in harmony with nature. We have to believe that nature is a complete system, a living system. It cannot be over-exploited. Human beings are not over and above nature. Nature sustains us so we have to



sustain nature. We have to relook at those cultures and religions which respect, worship or treat nature as a living system. We have to look at and learn from people who live close to nature, women, tribals, aborigines, peasants. We have to give nature as much as we take from it or more and treat her with respect. Production has to be based on renewable sources of energy.

In all our traditions there were a lot of practices to make us live in harmony with nature and for instance in India many people I know, do not pluck anything from a tree or plant after dark. Sabbath or a day of rest is said to be based on a similar principle. Originally man always worked on nature; work was cutting trees, taking trees from one place to another, hunting animals, building things; so rest on the 7th day is also giving nature some rest. There are many rituals to worship plants, trees, grains, fruit, to worship the five PANCH MAHABHUTAS or five basic elements: prithvi [earth], aap [water], tejas [fire or light], vayu [air], akasha [space]. "All living beings are born and evolve out of the five Mahabhutas occupy a revered place in Indian philosophy. These are ways to create harmony, to create space for the balance between nature and man to be

rebuilt. The ordinary Indian woman who worships the Tulsi plant, worships the cosmic as symbolised in the plant. The peasants who treat seeds as sacred, see in the seeds the connection to the universe [Vandana Shiva].

We have to perceive the connections between animate and inanimate nature like Jainism and Buddhism did; like the aborigines all over the world did and do. They consider every part of the earth as sacred. What is remarkable is that these principles were perceived and enunciated when there was no ecological crisis, no threat to survival. Indian philosophy and culture and also the practice of millions of people is still based on this respect for all creatures; it also recognizes the cyclical nature of all creation. The linear notion of "progress" imposed on every one by the West has proved to be limited. unsustainable and disastrous.

2. Sustainable development has obviously to be people-centered and people oriented; not things centered and things oriented. People have to be the subjects and not objects of their development, they have to be involved in decisions about their life and society and in this model there are no hierarchies in



people; like the white are superior to the Black, the Bhramins are superior to the uneducated. Every human being is to be respected and taken as an autonomous person. Development of human creativity, human potential, inner satisfaction, has to be the prime moving principles. Well being is not to be measured by how many material things you possess but by how creative you are, how involved you are with what you are doing, how much dignity each one of us has. We have to value the non-material requirements of human beings, like our desire to grow, to be creative, to love and be loved, to control our own lives and destinies. Reduction of needs and desires, control over mind and emotion can also be extremely gratifying. As Mahatma Gandhi said, our concern should be the "last man" [and woman], the poorest in society. Only if we aim for the well being of the most deprived in society will there be overall well-being.

3. Sustainable development has to be woman-centered. I am not saying this because I am a woman or a feminist. I am saying this because historically and even today women take care of the basic needs of society like food, fodder, fuel, shelter, nurturing. This makes them close to

nature. As child-bearers they have had to be more in tune with their own nature and have had to be more caring and nurturing. I am not saying men cannot do it. Nor am I saying that women are biologically more caring and nurturing. Women are what they are because of their socialization for centuries, and because of their preoccupation with sustenance, nurturing, nursing.

Women, especially rural women are also the ones whose survival is most threatened by ecologically disastrous development. Women are the poorest, the most vulnerable. When forests, or lands or rivers, or wells die, these women mourn the most because they are the most affected. Because women know the pains of creation, they hate destruction most. This is why in struggles to save forests, struggles against pollution, in movements against militarisation women are in the forefront. Women are more likely to insist that basic needs be satisfied, that killings be stopped. This is why women have to be at the centre of sustainable development.

However, the entire responsibility of creating, nurturing and sustaining life should not, anymore remain with women alone. Production of life, caring and nurturing must become men's work also. This would not only change the



present unfair sexual division of labour but also "demilitarise" and humanise men.

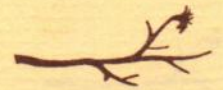
4. Sustainable Development has to be basic needs oriented. Sustenance for all rather than profits for a few. Majority of the people must first get sustenance, their basic needs must be satisfied before some people squander the limited resources of the earth on conspicuous consumption.

Sustainability requires relinquishing levels of consumption of the rich. There is no way that the present levels of consumption can continue without catastrophic outcomes. This is the most urgent action the industrialised world has to take. However, lowering of consumption levels can be seen not as deprivation but as liberation; liberation from greed, want, competition, envy, perpetual, endless, mindless and crippling desires.

5. Decentralisation is another principle of sustainable development. We have to move towards decentralisation in decision-making and in control over resources. Rich countries cannot plan and decide the fate of the poor countries; central governments cannot decide the fate of every region and community. Plans will have to come from people. More and more decentralisation should take place in politics; in agricul-

ture, in economics, in industry etc. Decentralisation will move away from homogeneity, it will allow diversity to flourish. Local people will live according to their own cultures and traditions.

6. Another principle which follows from decentralisation is to promote direct grass-root democracy and strengthen civil society. Participatory democracy at every level of society will unleash the energies of people. We have to start demanding direct participatory democracy as against representative democracy which is actually still rule from above and not rule of the people. Poor people have no possibility of running our democracies. It is the elite who are in control and this can only be changed through grass-root democracies, through smaller units, through decentralisation.
7. Politics of AHIMSA or non violence or respect for all life is another principle we have to follow and promote. Instead of each country defending its borders through armies, it would be a system of nonviolence where communities look after themselves. We need coercion because of centralisation, because some people want to control. So if a handful of people are not in control, if people are allowed to take care of their own decisions; if some people don't want to own



the world you will actually not need coercion, and armies. There has to be politics of peace; and non-violence at every level; non-violence against nature, against other people, other races, other classes, other sex etc. This is an essential principle of sustainable development. Not only do armies and billion dollar weapons industries have to be dismantled but people's minds have to be demilitarised. Seeds of peace and non-violence have to be sown in all minds.

What the world needs most today is cherishing, nurturing, caring, conserving. And in this who should give lead other than women? Mahatma Gandhi said that non-violence will have to be the basic principle of organization and women will be central in creating the non-violence ethos, the new world.

8. Sustainable development requires holistic, integrative and ecological ways of thinking and looking at phenomenon. The interconnectedness and interdependence of all phenomenon needs to be recognised. There is no place for narrow specialisation and compartmentalised ways of looking, thinking and acting. Dualities and hierarchies between culture and nature, mind and body, rational and emotional, objective and subjective also need to be rejected.

9. Sustainable development and sustainable living require a value system, different to the one which is [mis] guiding our present [mal] development paradigm. We agree with Josef Vavrousek [the former Minister of Environment in Czechoslovakia and the present Executive Director of the Institute of Applied Ecology in Prague] when he says in a recent article ["Human values for Sustainable Living" Published in the Independent Sector's Network, May, 1993, Geneva] that "selfishness and growth orientation are the major driving force of western European and North American economies and this poisons relations between people, as well as between human society and nature". The present North dominated economic, political and cultural regimes are universalising these values and this way of thinking. We need a cultural movement to promote values like respect for all life, simplicity, tolerance, equity. These values are still respected and practiced in many cultures and communities and we need to learn from such traditions and cultures.

The importance of spirituality for human beings also needs to be emphasized. All this will require that "we find a balance between human rights and freedoms on the one side and human



responsibilities towards other people and the whole Earth on the other [Joseph Vavrousek].

What has been said so far makes it quite clear that sustainable development is not what some people make it out to be i.e. a matter of some technical fixes, a matter of "green technologies", and "green products". Sustainable development and sustainable living require very basic and fundamental changes in the present thinking, values, behavior patterns, economic and political systems, production and consumption patterns, in our science and technology and media etc. etc. It requires moving away from domination and control to partnership and cooperation.

What Can We Do ?

You may now ask - what can you and I, very small people, insignificant groups, do in our own areas to make sustainable development a possibility? Let me tell you that if at all the present system will change, it is small people like you and me who will have to change it. This may sound strange but it is true. The new kind of development can only be ushered in by millions of small people who do not have a stake in the present system, who are actually victims of the present system. People like me who benefit from the present system can also join the struggle if

we are willing to give up the advantages we derive from the system.

Unless small people, small groups do experiments in their small ways all over, sustainable development is not possible. So actually the hope lies in small experiments like your own. All of us can try and do the following:

1. Let us begin with ourselves; let us women fill joy in our life and work. We have to look after our bodies and minds to feel strong and beautiful. We have to be SHAKTI and have to radiate this SHAKTI. Wherever we are we should support other women; give them strength; tell them they are important, their knowledge is important, they are the creators and nurturers. We begin with ourselves, our family, our daughters and mothers and then within our organizations, in the communities where we work.
2. Wherever we are, whatever we are doing we should empower people; tell people they are subjects of their own development; treat them with respect, recognise their dignity, their wisdom, their time-tested knowledge systems, their staying power.
3. Support people's organizations because empowerment of the poor is not possible as individuals. Small groups have to become



the training ground for grass-root level, participatory democracies. They can make people feel less vulnerable. Build people's self-confidence, self respect, management capabilities, creativity, inner strength, inner beauty. We have to strengthen civil societies so that people can challenge injustice, greed, exploitation.

4. We have to practice democracy everywhere, in our family, our organizations. We have to tell our male colleagues, or if we are the bosses, tell ourselves to be more democratic so that more and more people learn to practice, to respect, to love democracy; so that grass-root democracy takes root in our families, in our NGOs and in the communities we are working with. It is this practice which will create groups and people which are strong and autonomous and which will allow no one to attack and rob their dignity, their economies.
5. In whatever we do we should try to move towards self-reliance; not just financial self-reliance but self reliance in skills, knowledge, information; so that dependence on others, on the outside is reduced. Autonomous, self-reliant groups can safeguard their own interests. We have to move towards what Gandhiji called SWARAJ or

self-rule at every level. The principle of Swaraj is, if I want to rule myself I will not allow others to rule me; it also means that I cannot rule another person. Let us bring swaraj at an individual level -- within the family, at the panchayat level, national level, global level.

6. Move towards self-reliance will require that we do experiments to create alternative structures, alternative cultures; develop things which are in harmony with nature, experiments in agriculture, experiments in health. Similarly we have to develop legal systems, or media, which build on people's knowledge and traditions, which do not lead to unnecessary specialisation, fragmentation and compartmentalisation; which avoid knowledge going into the hands of a few people, whether it is in agriculture or industry, law or medicine or media. Lots of groups are reviving organic agriculture, herbal medicine, popularizing Ayurveda, homeopathy, naturopathy, yoga. Some groups are developing Lok Adalats or people's courts to avoid exploitation by the legal system. I am not saying we go back to everything which existed in the past. There were indeed many problems and injustices in our traditions. What we need is a creative mix of tradition and modern



which ensures respect for nature, justice, equity, democracy, diversity.

7. All this big work done by small people like us requires wonderful networking. If all these small experiments are isolated and fragmented they will not mean much. Little drops of water mean nothing. It is only when they come together that they become a stream, when several small streams come together they become a big stream. So we need networking at different levels. At the village level you can see networks between different families. Your Sanghams, your little groups are a network of families; then you have network of sangams at district level. Similarly we need networks at the national and international level. We need networking between different disciplines—economists, political scientists, lawyers, doctors, philosophers, dancers, singers, poets. All these people need to come together to create a new world. We need networking between different people's movements like peace movement, environment movement, women's movement, human rights movement, right-livelihood movements. These movements are different aspects of the same urges, same principles.
8. From our present obsession with the outside, we have to move towards controlling our

needs, our greed, our ego, our quest for power. We need to get in touch with our inside, with our psychic power, not just women but the whole of humankind has to begin a journey towards the inside, we have to explore the inner world rather than outer spaces.

We women have to get integrated with our own DHARMA, our true self, we have to recognize and develop our own SHAKTI, our boundless energy and creativity.

We have to give up the compartmentalized approach to things. We have to see the interconnections, move away from narrow specialisations which hamper a holistic view of things.

9. Wherever we are let us talk about and insist on values like justice, ethics, morality, beauty, love. Because these values were lost sight of, development lost its human face. We have to bring back these values into our private and public lives. Other values are reverence for all life, simple living, living in harmony with nature, respect for diversity. Wherever we find there is no justice, morality, ethics, we have to speak up, not keep quiet.

In the end I only want to say that a large number of small groups all over the world are already doing what I have suggested here. Let us put in our bit to create a better world.